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SUBJECT: LEBANON: GEAGEA PROPOSES COURTING ARMENIAN TASHNAQ

REF: BEIRUT 331

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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¶11. (C) Refreshed after his trip to the U.S., Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea walked back from his previous advocacy for electing a president with a half plus one majority, advocated revamping the cabinet and not simply replacing the two vacancies and promoted a new idea: courting the Armenian Tashnaq supporters away from the opposition, which could result in over 20 deputy seats for March 14. Dismissing the Arab League's efforts to resolve the political impasse, Geagea advocated early parliamentary elections, after March 14 unifies its position on a new electoral law.

¶12. (S) Geagea also said unrest in Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp could be resolved by a key personnel change, namely removing Georges Khoury, Director of Intelligence in the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF G-2). He expressed his concern about what he heard were two replacements of Christians with Shias in the Surete General, coupled with a report that the LAF allowed a truck of arms to pass unfettered, suggesting the GOL is increasingly standing down to Hizballah. End summary.

SUCCESS IN WASHINGTON

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¶13. (C) On April 3, the Charge met with Lebanese Forces (LF) leader Samir Geagea at his home in Maarab. Geagea had just returned from a three-week trip to the U.S. Advisors Elie Khoury and Joseph Nehme and PolOff also attended the meeting. Geagea expressed his pleasure at the success of his visit to Washington, happy with the support he received during his meetings. He praised NEA A/S Welch's statement to Congress on Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, which he had advocated be made, and requested that Washington and the Charge repeat this position frequently.

NO TO REVAMPING THE CABINET;  
NO TO HALF PLUS ONE

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¶14. (C) Discounting Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri's idea to renew the 2006 National Dialogue, Geagea reported that Berri himself was backing down from the proposal. Geagea told the Charge he does not trust Berri, and that he suspects Berri suggested the Dialogue in lieu of opening parliament. He also dismissed the Arab League initiative, saying that it is a mistake to engage with the Arabs because then Lebanon's

problems are regionalized, and Lebanon loses.

¶15. (C) Revisiting what he told the Charge in March (reftel), Geagea advocated revamping the cabinet but not simply by filling the two vacant Christian seats. He argued that March 14 would not gain much if it moved to replace only the two posts, but that the negative consequences of that move would be large. He said a different revamping of the cabinet was preferable; however, he did not believe others in March 14 were prepared to do what he thought was needed. He gave the example of replacing the Minister of Interior with a non-Christian, a move he anticipated his allies would oppose.

Not knowing when majority leader Saad Hariri would return from Saudi Arabia, he said he needed to see where Druze leader Walid Jumblatt and Saad stood on this issue, but that he suspected he would need to table this idea for the time being.

¶16. (C) Though believing that the Patriarch was opposed to making minor changes to the cabinet, Geagea said that a serious revamping of the government which would result in an increased Christian influence would receive the Patriarch's blessing. Nevertheless, he added, the Patriarch is not a tactician and speaks in generalities. "We will have no difficulty convincing the Patriarch if we have something of substance to propose," Geagea said.

¶17. (C) For the first time, Geagea said that it is not wise in today's environment to elect a president with a half plus one majority. (Comment: Geagea did not explain his new stance. We were quite surprised since he had been advocating a simple majority in every meeting with us, as recently as March, and during his trip to Washington. It is also interesting that this new view by Geagea comes when others in March 14 seem to

BEIRUT 00000470 002 OF 003

now be warming up to the idea of a simple majority. End comment.)

NEW STRATEGY: AGREE ON  
AN ELECTORAL LAW...

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¶18. (C) Rejecting all of the ideas to date and noting that there is currently no initiative with any momentum, Geagea said it was time for March 14 to agree on a new electoral law. He argued that proportional representation was the best method to counter Hizballah. Admitting that Saad would lose some of his seats, he posited that the potential gain of anti-Hizballah Shia deputies was more valuable to the March 14 coalition. While preferring a return to the 1960 law amended with a system of proportional representation, he said that March 14 would also benefit from a return to the 1960 law with small districts.

...BRING IN THE ARMENIANS,  
THEN EARLY PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

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¶19. (C) The next step, Geagea continued, was for March 14 to court the Armenian Tashnaq party, currently allied with the opposition. He explained that the split between March 14 and the March 8/Aoun opposition supporters in some districts was 50/50 and therefore the Tashnaq votes play a deciding role. He provided the example of the northern Metn district, which has eight seats, and approximately 30,000 people supporting March 8-led opposition, and the same number supporting March 14. 10,000 Tashnaq supports determine the outcome. He added that the same situation exists in Beirut, with another eight seats, in and Zahle, with seven seats (five Christian, two Muslim). "We can win with Tashnaq" he concluded.

¶10. (C) Geagea reported that he had been working with the Armenians for three years, and that the LF has a good relationship with Tashnaq, despite a souring period when Tashnaq leaders had promised some of their votes for the

August 2007 by-elections would go to March 14, but instead they all went to Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun. He added that MP Michel Murr also has positive relations with Tashnaq. On an electoral law, Geagea relayed that Tashnaq favors a "proper electoral system: small districts or proportional representation."

¶11. (C) The U.S. can play a major role in courting the Armenians, Geagea suggested. He proposed that the Charge introduce herself to Tashnaq leaders, and allow them an opportunity to air their grievances over how Saad has rejected them. Then, he continued, she should ask Tashnaq what it needs (which Geagea understands to be money). The U.S. can identify social and economic programs which it would be willing to fund to counter any Hizballah appeal. He noted that Tashnaq won't accept money from Saad. For its part, March 14 can offer Tashnaq assurances of participation in the government. Once Tashnaq is on board, March 14 should push for early parliamentary elections.

¶12. (C) Geagea said it would challenging to bring in the Armenians because Tashnaq is on bad terms with Saad and Phalange leader and former president Amine Gemayel. He set a timetable of three months to work on Tashnaq, and if in that time, March 14 is unsuccessful, then it should turn to the non-Tashnaq Armenians, who are currently allied with Saad; however, these Armenians make up only 30 percent of the Armenian votes. In this scenario, he proposed publicly endorsing these Armenians and publicly pressuring Tashnaq supporters, perhaps with economic sanctions, or as he referred to it, putting Tashnaq leaders on the U.S.'s "famous list" because they receive Hizballah funding, he alleged. Geagea said Armenians are susceptible to this kind of pressure because they have strong ties to the U.S. He cautioned that they are "allergic" to threats so this strategy must be pursued slowly.

RECOMMENDS NEW LAF G-2 DIRECTOR

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¶13. (S) Geagea acknowledged that the current unrest at Palestinian refugee camp Ain al-Hilweh is a "headache," but is easily containable. He said that the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), and in particular its intelligence division, LAF G-2, is taking a neutral position on the Palestinian issue because it is hedging its bets -- not ruffling the feathers of any parties in case Syria returns to occupying

BEIRUT 00000470 003 OF 003

Lebanon. Geagea said there would be an enormous improvement in the security situation if LAF G-2 Intelligence Director Georges Khoury were replaced.

WORRIED ABOUT GROWING HIZBALLAH INFLUENCE

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¶14. (S) In a private one-on-one conversation with the Charge, Geagea expressed his concern about a growing Hizballah influence in the upper ranks of the GOL and an increase in its capabilities. He relayed an incident in which UNIFIL stopped a truck carrying arms, and after consulting the LAF, was told to let the truck go free.

¶15. (S) Another worrying development, according to Geagea, was the recent replacement of two Christians in the Surete General by two Shia. He reported that Issam Halawi is now in charge of eavesdropping operations and Najwa Darghan is in charge of operations in the north. Geagea alleged that Minister of Interior Hassan Sabaa made this compromise with Hizballah; moreover, PM Fouad Siniora was informed but did not stop the replacement because he is not willing to stand up to Hizballah.

¶16. (S) Geagea also mentioned the ongoing issue of the fiber optic telecom network that Hizballah is reportedly

constructing in various parts of Lebanon. This story became public months ago, prompting outcries from GOL officials at the time, but a government report on it has never been made public.

COMMENT

117. (C) Geagea's self interest underline the proposals he is promoting. For example, many believe he wants to join the cabinet, and revamping the cabinet rather than simply replacing the two vacancies would allow that. Also, he shares with Tashnaq a desire for proportional representation, so calling for outreach to Tashnaq is based on an alignment of interests. Finally, Geagea's attack on the LAF G-2 stems from a deep-seated distrust of LAF leadership. In fact, he initially opposed LAF Commander Michel Sleiman's candidacy precisely because Sleiman refused to offer his assurances that the next generation of LAF leaders would not be LF rivals. End comment.

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